Let Them Read Gothic Novels

By Anna Bogutskaya

This text was commissioned by 'a space' arts as part of our Critical Writing programme. The writer was invited to respond to the ideas and themes in the exhibition, No Notion of Loving by Halves by Jocelyn McGregor.

When I was a child, I spent a summer in a summer camp a few hours outside of Barcelona, Spain, where I grew up. I can't remember the name of the town, but it was near a river, a forest, and included a lot of forced outdoor activities. Water-rafting, rock-climbing, star-gazing, overnight camping and other tortures that were meant to be "good for you". That summer was memorable for two events that were, each in their own right, defining coming-of-age scenes: I uttered my first swear word (screamed 'bitch' at an older girl who was bullying me); and I found a skull in the dirt and became convinced it was the remains of a fellow camper, murdered by our counselors. The former led to a small telling-off. The latter, to me concocting and spreading an elaborate plot wherein the camp counselors, themselves barely out of teenagedom, were poisoning and murdering kids. I saw signs everywhere of this complot, refused to eat the food, or smile back. I saw murder in their eyes.

Obviously, this was a delusion. Nobody was poisoning kids. I had not discovered a dead child's skull. It was probably a squirrel's. And the more questionable element of that story, in hindsight, is why I was digging in dirt in the first place.

The appetite for drama was strong in me. The outdoors is dull for an eleven-year old. And I had just discovered horror a few years before. My steady diet of R.L. Stine, Christopher Pike and Stephen King all had one thing in common: there was always darkness looming underneath idyllic scenarios.

I think of this desire for mystery and how it intertwines with the impulse to uncover the darkness looming under politeness when reading *Northanger Abbey*. This flux of impulses belongs to the young protagonist of many horror films, novels, as well as the one in Austen's book. It's the ear in the freshly mowed glass in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). It's the lonely old man who might be a murderer in *Now and Then* (1995). It's the clown hiding in the gutter of the suburban street in Stephen King's *It*. It's the possibly-definitely vampiric neighbour in *Fright Night* (1985). The protagonists of these stories are always young, eager to glimpse that which exists beyond the safe confines of their white-picket-fence existence. Sometimes, they're right, there really is

a killer clown, a conspiracy, a vampire. Other times, like Catherine Morland (the protagonist formerly known as Susan), or myself, they are just delulu. An avid reader of gothic novels, much like her creator, Jane Austen, Catherine is ready to imagine atrocities and horrors that only she is primed to uncover. Catherine wants to be a Gothic heroine. Unfortunately for her, she is merely a romantic one. And her Gothic predilections are consistently derided.

In *Northanger Abbey*, there is no ghost, no hidden crime, no dead body. Not even a billowing curtain. Curtains are a staple of horror films: they will move of their own volition (or that of ghosts); they are the hiding spot of ghosts (like the boy supposedly captured in *Three Men and a Baby*); they swell and billow as tension and dread builds, in *Poltergeist*, in *Rebecca*, *The Hunger* and *The Others*. (This is why I don't have curtains in my house.) Jocelyn McGregor sees them as "penetrable, permeable skins". But *Northanger Abbey* is to gothic novels what *Scream* is to slasher films. It understands the mechanics of the genre so well that it deploys them effortlessly, but it thinks itself too smart for this, so it draws attention to the mechanics, in process destroying their efficacy.

But while *Scream* also works as a slasher film, *Northanger Abbey* doesn't as a gothic story. It loses its steam halfway through, and by the end of the novel, Catherine has abandoned her Gothic imagination (read: her fandom) and is, in turn, recompensed with the love of and marriage to Henry. Her keenness to delude herself is informed by her naiveté as well as her imagination. She so desperately wants to imbue her life with mystery (read: drama) that she nearly wills it into being. As she walks, as a guest (or ghost), around Northanger Abbey, "listened to the tempest with sensations of awe; and, when she heard it rage round a corner of the ancient building and close with sudden fury a distant door, felt for the first time that she really was in an Abbey." In McGregor's installation and performance, Catherine's imagination is made of fabric, soft and loose, bashing itself against the stone walls of God's House Tower. Muslin and stone, reality and fiction.

I wander through this space much like Catherine, through pictures and video, through zoomed in images of stone walls and wooden floorboards. I imagine the creaking sounds of people walking around the bleached white muslin curtains, perhaps spooking each other, bumping into each other's bodies, confused and curious.

All around us, there are these opposites, laid bare: we are in a Jane Austen novel, we are in a horror movie; white satin and linen, clean, bloodless, but stained with red light; the implication of a body, with little shards of skin peeking out, but scrubbed of gore or desire. These scenes display themselves as invitations: the darkly curious will see

murder, secrets and ghosts; the rest, sleeping beauties. We are inside of *Northanger Abbey*, not the one on the page, but the one that exists in between the lines, the gothic story peeking through the coming-of-age romance.

To *really be* inside a Gothic novel is what Catherine craves, but that desire is put aside in the favor of romance. Austen's novel has a scene, when Catherine first arrives at the Abbey, where her mind and body are finally in tune. She is alone, wandering through the hallways while a storm rages outside the stone walls, and listens the furious sounds created around the Abbey. It is written to be scary, but it reads as a moment of unity between Catherine and her surroundings. For a mere moment, she feels like the Gothic protagonist she wants to be. Surrounded by possibilities in every shadowy corner. I wished for Catherine to find her ghosts. Much like I wished to find a conspiracy of summer camp murderers. Instead, she gets kicked out of her guests' house. And, possibly worse, she disappoints her love interest, Henry Tilney.

Reimagining the scene where Henry realises Catherine's delusion and chastises her for imagining his father to be capable of murder, McGregor's performance plays into how I read the scene in the book. Not as Henry as a love interest, but as a soft villain. In a romcom, this would be the moment when the protagonist realises they have messed up, followed by a dramatic interlude when the would-be lovers are separated and might not get back together in the end. In a horror film, this would be the moment the love interest reveals themselves to have been the killer all along. In *No Notion of Loving (or "dying") By Halves,* Henry is a sadist, toying with the naive Catherine as a prelude for something far worse that is obscured by the ghostly curtains. McGregor has gifted Catherine with a ghost, Susan, or Mathilda, and a murder plot. Critics have argued that Henry is the elder Austen, a gentle if mocking mentor, an intellectual hunk who will read history books as well as "lesser" ones like novels. A hierarchy of taste is established very early on in *Northanger Abbey*, one that intersects gender and class: boys like serious books, like history (read: non-fiction), while girls like silly stories (read: novels, especially gothic and romance; read also: Jane Austen's work itself). But his disdain is made more explicit by McGregor's reimagining.

Henry's stripping Catherine of her overeager imagination is unimpressive. I read it as repulsive. The inbuilt shaming of Catherine for her Gothic predilections goes hand in hand with the light-touch shaming that every horror fan has had to experience (What's wrong with you? Why would you watch that?) to one degree or another. Horror, in its literary and cinematic forms, is directly descended from Gothic literature. And much like the latter, it was simultaneously popular and derided. Not to be consumed or discussed in polite society. Not to be taken too seriously. Just like Catherine, who's patheticness as a protagonist makes me feel more protective of her. She does as she's

told, becoming less of herself by the end of the story. Humiliated, Catherine is finally cured of her gothic fantasies by the love of an acceptable man. (That's the *real* disappointment.) But no romance, not even an Austen one, will be as good as the spark that a good story, Gothic or horror or otherwise dark-hearted, can ignite.

About Anna Bogutskaya

Anna Bogutskaya is a writer, film programmer and podcaster. She writes for BBC Culture, The Guardian, MUBI, The New Statesman, TimeOut, amongst others, and has programmed for BFI, Edinburgh and Fantastic Fest. She is currently the Head of Screen at SXSW London. She hosts The Final Girls podcast, created and contributes to many others. She publishes the movie newsletter Admit One and has written two non-fiction books: Unlikeable Female Characters (2023) and Feeding the Monster (2024).